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'Science city' data fail Montgomery residents' calculator tests

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In debates over new development, data are often the most valuable currency, cited to demonstrate a project's value, impact on neighborhoods and effect on traffic. But the Washington area's legions of sophisticated community activists are increasingly reluctant to accept data from local officials, saying the numbers are unreliable.

"It's a very serious concern if you can't trust the numbers," said Montgomery County Council member Phil Andrews (D-Gaithersburg-Rockville).

Andrews represents the area west of Interstate 270 off Shady Grove Road where Johns Hopkins University [wants to build](#) as much as 20 million square feet of commercial, retail and residential space in what university officials describe as a world-class "science city."

Andrews and other critics say the data being used to support the plan are anything but scientific.

A similar debate in Northern Virginia recently led a founding member of a major community coalition to decry as "guesswork and fantasy" official projections about future development at Tysons Corner.

In Montgomery, the data questions have come into sharp focus as the administration of County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) has thrown its support behind the Hopkins project, which is pending before the council.

[Hopkins officials](#) and business leaders urge approval of the plan, saying it has the potential to create a \$10 billion scientific research center to rival North Carolina's Research Triangle or Palo Alto, Calif. County projections say it will triple the number of jobs in the area to at least 60,000, many with handsome wages. Project backers say it would have a minimal impact on the surrounding community and a maximum impact on the county treasury.

Although many in the county applaud any effort to attract companies and government agencies involved in scientific research and innovation, speaker after speaker at a recent community meeting said the data aren't telling the real story. As [community groups](#) and some politicians have burrowed more deeply into the numbers, they are concluding that the Hopkins project is too big and too dependent on the not-yet-built Corridor Cities

Transitway and is unlikely to bring prestigious academic offerings to the area. [Instead, they say, it is simply a big commercial venture by a developer wearing academic robes.](#)

Among their concerns: that the science city would not boost the county's revenue by \$31 million annually, as the county says, that it would create massive traffic jams, even at newly established "acceptable" levels; that it would strain public schools beyond what the county has estimated; and that, ultimately, it would not help the county's bottom line but would cost taxpayers more. The county's annual budget is more than \$4 billion.

"In the end, this is not about science. This is about corporate welfare," said Bragi Valgeirsson, an economist by training who lives nearby and did his own math to evaluate the project. He was enthusiastically applauded this month at the meeting, which drew more than 200 people. "It's about JHU asking us to foot the bill for their real estate speculation."

Valgeirsson said that "taxpayers will collect about \$4 billion over the next 30 years and spend about \$4.8 to \$5.7 billion. . . . We have to invest billions of dollars in infrastructure to accommodate them. So how much will taxpayers have to pay for each job? . . . It comes out to \$38,000 per each job. In other words, for every 2.5 jobs, we have to spend about \$100,000."

More challenges

Andrews said a study for the county by Municap, part of a \$32,000 contract, undercounted the number of moderately priced housing units required by county law; double-counted the economic contributions of the 22,000 employees in the area; failed to fully calculate the impact of newcomers on public schools; and overestimated the likely price of new housing, which could affect predictions about income from taxes and fees.

Andrews also challenged county planners' decision to revise the standard for tolerable rush-hour speeds to 9 mph if there is more public transit. "My commute, which is 20 minutes now, would triple to an hour under that plan," Andrews said.

Diane Schwartz Jones, a top Leggett aide, acknowledged that there have been miscalculations and mathematical errors but said they are minimal and do not alter the project's overall value to Montgomery and the region.

The [Hopkins project](#) has the potential to make Montgomery an international center for bioscience innovation and should be analyzed in a broad context, Jones said. "We have the premier research university of the country, if not the world, wanting to create formidable partnerships."

Hopkins officials declined to be interviewed but issued a statement saying that the university "continues to support . . . the plan and we continue to talk with community members about the great science and research for which Hopkins is known worldwide."

Council member Michael Knapp (D-Upcounty), who chairs the committee that oversees development, supports much of the plan but said he had warned Hopkins officials of the perils of the numbers game.

"The debate needs to be about how we are going to grow the county differently," he said. "If it gets down to how many more cars go through an intersection or 1 million square feet versus 2 million square feet, that misses the point."

Overlooked

The [project](#) has hit other roadblocks with its numbers. The county Planning Board is insisting that more public transit be built before Hopkins can proceed beyond initial development. But state officials said the funding is far from assured and suggested that Montgomery political leaders are overly optimistic.

Some local officials and residents say they are uncertain whose numbers to believe. The city councils in Gaithersburg and Rockville, which have long complained about the data, say that when the planning agency crunched its numbers, it did not count them among those likely to be affected. They have asked the Montgomery County Council to either substantially revise the plan or send it back to the Planning Board for reevaluation.

"This large amount of new development could have detrimental impacts on the quality of life in existing nearby communities, including Rockville and Gaithersburg," says the cities' resolution.